

Friends,

We are meeting after a year to discuss our common problems. As you are aware, the Indian Historical Records Commission deals with all kinds of historical records. The scope of our deliberations is, therefore, wide and extensive. It will, however, be of advantage to confine ourselves to matters of first concern, and I am sure you will agree that these relate to questions affecting the National Archives. National Archives are in all countries the treasure house of their historical wealth, and we in India can justly take pride for the extent and magnitude of our riches in this field.

Our National Archives contains a vast collection of records but systematic series begin ~~only~~ from 1672. Some of the latest records are as late as 1948. They, therefore, tell the story of near upon 300 years of India's history of a most interesting and momentous period. If what remains of the scattered records of the Moghul period are added to these collections, we can say that our records go back to the 15th century. There are not many countries which can claim records which go so far back. From the point of view of quantity also ours is one of the biggest collections not only in Asia, but in the world. I cannot give you the exact number of our records for much work of indexing and cataloguing still remains, but to give you some idea of the extent of the collection, I may say that, if all these records are assembled in one place, there is no building in India big enough to contain all of them.

It is hardly necessary for me to stress before the present audience the importance of national records. Such records are the basis of history and can alone give

authenticity to our knowledge of the past. When we read of the past, we are often troubled by the fact that our knowledge is neither complete nor adequate. Contemporary historians hardly ever leave accounts which satisfy succeeding generations, and in fact they are often not in a position to judge what should be recorded and what left out. If, however, complete records are available, the annals of the past can be reconstructed, but, in the case of these periods in Indian history, such records do not exist. We know that during the Moghul period, India had all the instruments of civilised government and that full records were kept of all official decisions and happenings. Unfortunately, most of these records were destroyed during the troubled period of the 18th century. In consequence, we have lost some of the most valuable sources of our knowledge of the age. It is, however, fortunate that the histories written by ABUL FAZAL, ABDUL HAMID LAMORI and KHAFI KHAN based on official records are available to us. Even though they were written from an official point of view, their use of records ^{makes them} ~~may be the~~ valuable source material for us.

During the 19th century, European States adopted the convention that all State records should be opened to the public after a lapse of 50 years. Records of the Napoleonic era were thus released to the public about 1870. The Napoleonic era was a period of great progress in different fields, and it was described contemporaneously by many well-known historians. In fact, all the known methods of history writing were used in making the Napoleonic period ~~xxx~~ vivid to the public of the day, but even then, when the official records became available in 1870, it was found that our knowledge of the period was both enriched and altered. Much new light was thrown on obscure incidents and happenings.

Many old opinions had to be revised in the light of the new information.

Similarly, the official papers relating to the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857 were released in 1907. The Government of India published a three volume History of the Mutiny based on these records. It is true that this book was written from the British point of view, and did not, therefore, do full justice to the Indian participants of the mutiny. It is, therefore, necessary that these records should be examined afresh, and a true account of the period written in as objective a manner as possible. Even then the official history which was based on these records revealed many facts that were previously unknown and corrected many of our wrong ideas about the different characters who participated in these momentous happenings.

These two examples show how essential records are for a true interpretation of history. If, however, the records are to be utilised to the fullest extent, it is necessary that they should not only be preserved, but also arranged and classified systematically. There must also be a sufficient number of scholars with the necessary knowledge and scientific attitude to take full advantage of the information contained in them. In our National Archives, we have an immense storehouse of such records but two things have stood in the way of our fully utilising them :

- 1) We have not been able to make arrangements for keeping all the records in one place.
- 2) We have not been able to appoint the staff which is necessary for classification and indexing of the available records.

In 1948, I had intended that Government of India should undertake this task at an early date, and accordingly a scheme was drawn up for improving the tempo and the quality of the work. This demanded some increase in the staff of the ~~National~~ Archives to cope with the additional work, but unfortunately, financial stringency prevented our implementation of even this modest scheme.

I would like to give members of the Commission some idea of the magnitude of the task which faces the National Archives to-day. In 1939, the National Archives was little more than a medium size depository, with a limited body of records. These were, however, fairly well organised though they were not open to students for research. To-day, it is one of the leading archival institutions in the world, and is certainly the largest in Asia. It is also mechanically one of the best equipped. Our holdings in the last ten years have greatly grown in bulk, specially since December 1948. It was then decided that all records prior to 15th August 1947 of the Residencies and Political Agencies of the Government of India would be transferred to the National Archives. The increase since then has been almost phenomenal. The number of Residencies and Political Agencies which then went out of commission was 15 and 14 respectively. Of these, the National Archives has already received the records of 14 Residencies and 11 Political Agencies though many of these records have large gaps. These transferred records number 11555 volumes, and 3581 bundles, and cover a period from 1672 to 1949.

Apart from the sudden accession to our collections, we are also getting an increasing number of records from different Ministries and their Attached and Subordinate offices. With growing consciousness,

both in the Government and among the people, of the value of records, destruction of records has now become out of question. Besides, the increasing function which Government are undertaking and necessity of written instruments in a democratic government make it inevitable that the number of records will continue to grow. This will accentuate problems of space and maintenance for each government department, and it is inevitable that offers of transfer of records from different governmental agencies will continually become more pressing. It is also proposed to legislate in order to ensure complete and regular transfer of all records to the National Archives.

Further problems have been created as the material which is now coming to the National Archives is often in a chaotic condition. When it was decided to transfer the records of the Residencies and Political Agencies it was also decided to transfer all existing inventories and indexes to these records. This was essential if the National Archives was to check these records, arrange them in their proper order and supply them to government or to research scholars on requisition. It is, however, unfortunate that many of the Agencies either did not maintain working lists or indexes of their records, or their records got considerably disarranged during the transfer. As a result, it is difficult to find documents as and when required. These records have, therefore, to listed, re-arranged in their original order and properly indexed. Only then can these records tell correctly the story of the transactions of which they are the evidence. Unless restored to their original order, the documents will remain isolated pieces, disconnected, meaningless and unreliable. The phenomenal increase in ~~and~~ records production in

in the departments themselves, and their indifferent maintenance in the current and semi-current stages have also added to the difficulties which the Archives faces. I may cite one example. One series of Political Department records from 1880 to 1930 which has just been transferred to the Archives does not possess even a check list.

The physical condition of large bulks of these records also presents serious problems. Due to the various reasons, many of these series are in a very bad state of preservation and require immediate rehabilitation in order to ensure their continued existence. To give members some idea, I may mention that about 3000 volumes of the Residency records require major and another 4000 require minor repairs and reconditioning immediately. This task of restoration is very urgent as the climate of New Delhi accelerates the physical deterioration of the records. In order to cope with the situation, the processes of rehabilitation have now been mechanised.

Members of the Commission are also aware that the records have now been thrown open for research. At first, only records up to 1880 were available for inspection, but now all records up to 1901 have been brought under this category. More recent records will also be thrown open in the years to come. In addition, the Archives has undertaken an extensive programme of analysis, indexing, condensing, editing and publication of records in order to facilitate the work of research and reference. The Historical Records Commission has also increased the scope of the work of the Archives as the Records Survey Committees in the different States work directly under the Commission. Interest in the ~~active~~ archives and archival work is growing. Along

Along with this, the demand for information from various sources has grown and is still growing.

On the one hand, therefore, we have increasing pressure of work and growing interest of both Government and ^{the} public. On the other hand, we know that the prevailing financial stringency will not permit proper expansion of the Department in the next few years. In this situation the only way of making full use of the historical wealth placed at our disposal is to seek the cooperation of universities and learned societies. If a sufficient number of scholars take up the task and undertake research into the material which has been collected, much can be done in spite of the inadequacy of public funds. Another method which occurs to me is to allot to postgraduate students of History in different universities specific tasks in respect of listing, cataloguing and indexing of these records. If universities agree to recognise such work as part of the normal training of a postgraduate student in History, this will not only benefit the students themselves but it will also be a real national service. It is only through the cooperation of professors, lecturers, scholars and research and postgraduate students that the vast material we have can be properly utilised. I understand that our Director of National Archives had approached the universities once but the response was not fully satisfactory. I would like to take this occasion, when so many distinguished scholars are present, to press once more that this work of urgent national importance may be undertaken by all the universities and learned societies without further delay. I have every hope that with your cooperation we can overcome the difficulties created by financial stringency and create conditions in which a truly national history of India can be written based on authentic records.